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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001192

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: REGIONAL ACTIVISTS CONFIRM: BELARUSIANS ARE  
OPPRESSED

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Emboffs recently traveled to Polotsk and Baranovichi in introductory visits with local authorities, opposition activists, and entrepreneurs. Opposition activists and journalists in both communities openly described the repression they face, but continue to cooperate together in preparation for the local council elections scheduled for January. Polotsk businessmen praised the economic possibilities in Belarus, but hesitated to directly answer politically oriented questions or criticize the authorities. Baranovichi activists gave a more pessimistic account of Belarus' economic situation. End Summary.

Regional Parties Working Close Together

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¶2. (C) On November 1, Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff met with opposition activists in Polotsk to gauge their preparedness for the upcoming local elections scheduled for January 14, ¶2007. Head of the local Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Leonid Karpishin noted that local level coalition parties in total would support 10-15 candidates for local council seats in the Polotsk and Novopolotsk regions. Karpishin praised the level of cooperation among all Polotsk party chapters in preparing for the elections, claiming that they meet regularly and have relatively few conflicts.

¶3. (C) Poloffs during regional travel have heard similar stories of cooperation among parties in the run-up to local elections. On October 12, regional political party leaders in Baranovichi claimed to Poloff and EUR/UMB Belarus Desk Officer that regional party chapters meet weekly, work closely together, and are fielding united candidates for local elections.

"We Are Repressed"

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¶4. (C) An unfortunate, but familiar theme in poloffs' regional travel is the repression exercised by local authorities on opposition activists. Despite the presence of a city executive committee member in the meeting, Karpishin and his colleagues listed the tactics used by Polotsk authorities to prevent opposition participation in the elections: opposition nominees not included on election commissions, candidate signatures invalidated, student activists expelled or threatened with expulsion, workers fired or threatened with job loss, and party/union deregistration and/or office eviction.

15. (C) Poloff and Desk Officer heard similar complaints in Baranovich. The local chapter of the BPC was the only registered opposition party. However, after coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich visited their Baranovich office, the landlord suspended the BPC's lease, giving the authorities grounds to cancel the BPC's registration at any moment. During the presidential elections the local Belarusian National Front (BNF) and BPC leaders were arrested and held until after the vote was counted. Independent journalists added that strict state control over information sources and distribution, in addition to fear in society, kept citizens from freely expressing their opinions.

#### Authorities Fail to Hide Their Spite

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16. (C) The Polotsk authorities' negative attitude towards the opposition only strengthened the opposition's assertions of repression. According to Polotsk mayor Vladimir Tochilo, the opposition regularly failed to follow the electoral code and for that reason was not included on the election commissions. When asked about clashes between local authorities and independent trade unions, Tochilo advised Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff to scrutinize the independent unions' small memberships before jumping to conclusions. Tochilo stressed that he was above all a "representative of the President" and part of the presidential "vertikal." (Note: Viktor Stukov, head of the Free Trade Union at the Polotsk Steklovolokno factory, told Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff in a separate meeting that the authorities granted his union a legal address needed for registration. Stukov suspected the authorities' decision to grant the address to the union materialized in anticipation of our scheduled visit to Polotsk. End note.)

#### Entrepreneurs Praise Economic Conditions a Little Too Much

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17. (C) Polotsk entrepreneurs shied away from politics during lunch. Successful businessman Vladimir Zakharov, who owns a construction company, cable TV company, retail stores, and a newspaper told Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff that it was possible to start a successful business in commercial spheres abandoned by the government. According to Zakharov, Belarus' business climate had evolved as much in ten years as the U.S.' climate has done in the last century, resulting in favorable laws that were no stricter than U.S. legislation. Petr Livshits, food producer and wholesaler, claimed that business could survive in any climate, commenting that businesses close mainly due to bad management. According to Zakharov and his colleagues, the GOB provided equal conditions for all businesses and did not interfere.

18. (C) Independent journalists in Baranovich gave a different story. Editors-in-chief of newspapers Gazeta Dlya Vas, Gazeta Slonimskaya, and Intex-press told Poloff and Desk Officer that a third of the region's population worked abroad. Private businesses close to the government are developing while individual entrepreneurs without connections are constantly battling tax and licensing problems in order to survive. In addition, 70 percent of manufacturing equipment at uncompetitive state factories is antiquated with no new investment in sight.

#### Local Entrepreneurs Hold Tongue on Politics

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19. (C) When asked whether political freedom existed in Belarus, the entrepreneurs in Polotsk did not directly answer the question. Car wash and repair businessman Ruslan Tabachnikov commented that they were free to travel, which did not exist during the Soviet Union. Zakharov added that he had a newspaper that provided unbiased information and was not pressured by the local authorities. However, Zakharov conceded that his paper practiced self-censorship, noting

that his newspaper would not criticize local authorities because criticism "did not solve problems." (Comment: In private conversations with Emboffs in Minsk, Zakharov was more critical of the Belarusian authorities. End comment.)

¶10. (C) The local BNF head in Baranovichy said tax authorities impose huge fines on businessmen for alleged violations if they get involved in opposition politics. Independent journalists added that even apolitical business leaders cannot run for city council because authorities fear anyone who might be independent.

Comment  
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¶11. (C) What we often see on regional trips are cities experiencing little opportunities for the youth, declining populations, varying degrees of economic stagnation, and a small opposition being squeezed by local authorities who are trying to pass off their city much like a Potemkin village. Emboffs trips to Baranovichy and Polotsk only reinforced the sense of oppression and authorities' tight control over society. Opposition activists have nothing to lose, given that many of them have been forced out of employment, and continue to work together to challenge the authorities. The local entrepreneurs cannot afford to be vocal without risking the future of their businesses. Therefore, they, with a smile, use their wealth to build schools and roads and fund city projects, though they are most likely grumbling behind their teeth.

Stewart